

Dust and Echos

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Summary: Post Halo 3. The Halo 3 ending cries out to all fans to make a fic.

Dust and Echos

"There are a lot of them. More than what we expected." Hailey's voice on the TEAMCOMM confirmed what Luke was thinking. The three were spread out evenly around the room, and Luke was hoping the high concentration of Grunts was just particular to his sector.

"Confirmed." Responded Ian. "Your call Chief."

Without hesitation, "Of course we will still continue. Change in rules of engagement; once it gets hot, burn ammo. The more noise we make the greater the chance these conscripts will break and run." Now Luke was glad he decided to bring those eight extra magazines for his MA5V. This change in plan was risky. Though he wanted to rout the Grunts, he would rather the Brute reinforcements not be able to find his team in the small amount of time they needed. It was obvious now that things were about to get a lot hotter than he had hoped. He knew at this moment that Ian was grinning inside his helm.

"All right. Initiate phase I. I take the first shot." Invisible, Luke began his descent into the main packaging room. The complex they were hitting was centered on this assembly line bay. Luke could see lines of drafted Grunts, tediously packaging the light blue substance into large cube parcels. The whole operation was a far cry from the technologically run facilities the Brutes were used to extorting, but since the dissolution of the Covenant, they were lucky to extort the occasional outer rim asteroid mining facility. The rustic human assembly bay was cheaply converted into a narcotic distribution center in an effort to produce war funds. It was a nuisance, but Luke preferred these surgical raids to all out war.

He dropped the last few rungs of the ladder to the ground floor. His

knees bent, deftly masking the noise of his drop. All through the isles between rows of supply crates and machinery was a familiar sight: Grunts sleeping on duty, sitting cross-legged in the fetal position. Luke could see the soft hazel clouds of gas expelling from their methane masks at slow, regular intervals.

So he began silently cutting the Grunts' throats and thinning opposition. He bent down and quietly killed each Grunt with the retractable blade in his right cuff as he moved toward the center of the bay. There was his target. In the center was a three-story observation platform, and on the top was a single plasma turret manned by a bored Grunt in green armor. They obviously weren't expecting any sort of attack on their operation. Certainly not Spartan, let alone three,

"Standby," Luke ordered. "The only Brutes I've seen are a rabble of overseers armed with spikers. Confirm."

"Confirm lead, and in position." Ian acknowledged.

"Ready."

"Marshall, repeat: marshall." Luke grabbed a plasma grenade from his utility belt and assumed throwing position. Bending at the knees he triggered the small devise, which ignited. Blue flames erupted from the sphere, enveloping but not touching his hand. Before any one took notice of the floating blue fire, he expertly lofted it over the platform where it took purchase halfway down the turret.

The Grunt was startled awake by the flash and only had enough time to gasp and fall off the turret before being mostly vaporized.

First objective complete, Luke immediately deactivated his active camouflage, spun, and cut down a Brute overseer startled by the explosion. The entire atmosphere changed. The explosion startled every worker in the complex, shifting them from their interminably tedious work to a battlefield, like being thrown out of an aircraft during a dead sleep. An explosion of confusion ensued. Most impulsively ran for cover or an exit, the latter quickly being blocked off by armed guards. A few with more steely nerve upholstered weapons and fired, mostly incoherently. Friendly fire ensued.

Luke sprayed a guard in the torso, knocking the wind from his lungs and sending him to the floor. He spotted an entire assembly line, fear stricken, running for the exit. Luke spared them but was unmerciful to those who dawdled in order to keep the rout going.

Plenty of gunfire could be heard echoing though the massive chamber. The chilling buzz of spike carbines mingled with the fast chop of assault rifles. Good. The Spartans were using ammo. Luke kept moving to keep from being pinned down by Brute reinforcements. Spikes and bullets ripped through supply crates, ripping and blowing them open and filling the atmosphere with a haze of the blue powdery drug good. Luke's polarized lens helped him look through it, while his air filter kept him in a keen state of mind. The Spartans' advantage was growing.

Luke kept his mind on his objective. Turning a corner, he drew faster

than a Brute and sent lead slugs into its head. What Luke didn't see was another behind it who, thinking fast, grabbed his pack mate's body as a shield. Luke reacted, but flatfooted, and sent rounds piercing the Brute's arm. Not its shooting arm.

Growling, it used its marred arm to hold up the dying carcass and with its other leveled its spiker like a pistol at Luke, who wasted no time. Cradling his weapon, he dove to the floor, a line of spikes following him. One spike found his left calf, bending and shattering against his shield but draining it away. He rolled on impact and landed kneeling, weapon ready, a meter from the Brute.

They both fired, Luke an instant before his adversary. In his haste he shot low, filling the Brute's belly full of lead. This caused it to swing its arm spasmodically, unleashing a wave of spikes just over Luke's head. Luke allowed the barrel climb to adjust his aim for him, stopping it just at the Brute's forehead. Two carcasses fell to the floor.

Scanning the vicinity, Luke continued more cautiously. He heard short, controlled gunfire at the end of his corridor. "I'm right around your corner," he warned. The firing soon stopped and Hailey's head appeared at the end of the corridor. Spotting Luke, she jogged past him with her rifle down, then knelt behind him, rifle ready.

Luke saw a Grunt come into view, spot the Spartans, and reach for its pistol. Without hesitation he gunned it down. He noticed the mussel flash was unusually bright and long. "Ian, how close are you?"

"Just aboutâ€¦ got it. Heading to the rendezvous point now."

Luke and Hailey headed toward the center isle, a 12 meter wide main artery that bisected the entire chamber and ended at the utility elevator for transport of goods to the hanger. There they saw seven Brutes scattered down the corridor, all with clear lanes of fire.

"Your call, Chief." Hailey looked up to her commander, willing to forsake her cover at any moment.

Luke took one more quick glance down the corridor, gave it a moment's thought, then said, "The rate at which small arms fire is filling the air with drugs, soon we won't be able to fire our weapons without blowing ourselves up. We don't have time. The element of surprise should be enough to tip the scale in our favor. On my mark."

Hailey nodded and got into the sprinter's position in front of Luke. With his left hand, the Chief ripped a fragmentation grenade from his belt and pulled the pin, holding the lever down with his middle and index fingers. "One," Luke's rifle was down, and he gripped it tightly. "Two," Hailey's muscles tensed and her eyes picked out a piece of cover on the opposite side of the corridor. "Three." Luke's mind was suddenly filled with adrenaline, preparing him for some fast shooting. "MARK!" He let go of the lever.

They both sprang from their position, Hailey low to the ground bolting the twelve-meter distinct cover, Luke lobbing the M6 far downrange. As soon as it left his hand, he lifted his assault rifle and started firing.

A Brute caught Hailey out of the corner of its eye. Three more heard the M6 bounce on the ground and continue toward them. The explosion alerted the rest. A Brute standing almost directly over the grenade took 180°, of the shrapnel and went down instantly, crying and whimpering in pain. Two more received shrapnel in varying degrees, both bleeding, yelling and one running for cover. Luke quickly finished the third.

By laying down suppressive fire Luke burned up his fifth mag, but forced three more of the brutes into cover, giving Hailey that time to make it. Two, however, were undaunted, and opened fire at the exposed Spartan.

Spike dug into and ricocheted off the floor. The two lines of spikes followed closely on Hailey's heels, until three bounced off her leg, a fourth and fifth finishing other shield and finding purchase. She dove and rolled the last two meters into cover.

Luke heard her cry over the TEAMCOMM, and in fury emptied the last five rounds at the nearest Brute. They ripped through flesh, but the unphased Brute returned fire, his friend following. Luke narrowly dipped into cover and avoided the shots.

"Status," Luke looked over to Hailey."

Hailey looked up back at him, "I'm fine, its going to be a little slower of an exit than you hoped, though."

"All right. Battle rifles, short controlled bursts." They both grabbed the battle rifles from their backs, replacing them with MA5Vs. They both inched their way around the corners, opening up their field of view degree by degree until they found targets. Hailey found her target first. She zoomed in, seeing the Brute head peaking out of cover trying to find her. Without hesitation, she centered on the head and unleashed two triple-round bursts. The first four rounds dented the small helmet, then the last two high caliber rounds pierced armor, flesh, skull, and brains, and the Brute dropped instantly. Luke dispatched his target similarly.

Luke looked to the next Brute, but by now all the Brutes were digging in hugging cover and suffering no more exposure to the Spartans. The tables had turned.

"Go," Luke ordered. Grabbing assault rifles, they burst from cover and ran down the corridor. They ran unchallenged while all the Brutes hid behind miscellaneous crates and equipment scattered throughout the hallway. Luke whirled around a crate, catching a Brute by surprise and opening fire point blank. He finished it off with a rifle butt to the face fast enough to break the thing's neck.

After finishing a Brute herself point blank, Hailey looked up and "Chief, heads up!" was all she had time to yell. Luke spun around to see a Brute who had come out of hiding brandishing a bruteshot. Luke had no time. On impulse, he leapt, an awe-inspiring surge into the air, a Spartan's jump. With one bound he soared three meters and covered six meters' distance. Grenades exploded where he just stood, and followed his arc into the air. Five grenades spread hither and thither, exploding on wall, roof, and obstacle, sending shrapnel all around the room. Wood crates splintered and plastic bags tore,

sending their blue contents into the air. The Brute gritted his teeth, ready for the final shot, zooming in on Luke's apex. He pulled the trigger and the dull click foreshadowed his doom. His six-grenade belt was spent, and there was no time to reload.

Immediately Hailey leveled her assault rifle at the Brute and stated firing. Bullets ripped furry flesh, but hit nothing vital enough to phase him. Luke landed close enough to it that Hailey stopped firing. She began running around its flank.

As Luke landed, the Brute's eyes went wide with anger. He landed a mere meter from the animal. It bared fang, and with one powerful motion stepped toward him and hacked at him with the scythed bayonet on the butt of its weapon. The blow was powerful enough to rend a boar. But Luke was faster than a boar. Seeing the Brute's movement, he sidestepped and swiftly stabbed his blade deep into the thing's back. It went in too easily. Luke realized he had missed, stabbing into flesh and muscle instead of spine. His reward was not the exceptional prize of spinal fluids and a Brute spazing to death on the floor, but the common amount of black Brute blood, which poured out onto his arm as from a spout.

The creature screamed in pain and malice, but Luke wasn't fooled. He had seen Brutes shrug off worse wounds than these. It readied for a bone crushing body slam. As it shot forward, Luke stuck his foot on the Brute and sprang off perpendicular to the attack. The Brute, trapped in its own massive momentum, fell to the floor, and Hailey drilled its immobile skull.

Luke, panting a little with excitement, nodded in thanks to Hailey. Nothing more ever had to be said between Spartans.

The two jogged to the end of the corridor. Entering the giant service elevator, they spun around and hugged the slanted doorway sides for cover. They scanned the isle with a full field of view between them.

"Ready when you are, Ian," Luke called.

"Almost there. I'll be coming in hot."

"Copy that."

And he did. All Luke saw was Ian dive into view spikes, needles, and plasma chasing him, trusting his brother and sister to cover him. Hailey and Luke readied battle rifles as he crawled for cover. Hailey took the first target and the two oscillated tangos. One Brute ran in to view and six rounds later lay on the ground. Two grunts hesitated at the sight, then fell too. Another two Brutes died before fear and confusion halted the pack's momentum. By then Ian had quickly crawled behind a crate.

Luke stepped out from cover and aggressively stood in the middle of the doorway. "GO, GO, GO!" He yelled. Ian leapt up and ran low for the finish line.

The Spartans were hopeful. Luke's soul reached out and dragged his brother to safety. He and Hailey intensely prepared to repel an onslaught. Ian was halfway there when four Brutes burst from cover. That was when the Spartans fouled up. In their tense haste, Luke and

Hailey acquired and fired at will without prioritizing, quickly eliminating the first two.

However, the third ran around the corner carrying a plasma cannon, its bottom mangled from the coarse ripping off its stand. The Brute, obviously a chieftain by its old Magna Bella armor decor, wore power armor, which clung to his body and actively repelled projectile and plasma alike. With a war cry he unleashed a barrage of plasma. The intense kickback from the cannon shook the 500lb Brute like a bobblehead, its massive frame fighting and absorbing the shock.

Plasma raced for the Spartans. The great kickback, distance between gunner and target, and the Brutes' characteristic contempt for calculated accuracy caused the bolts to go everywhere. Metal melted and bags of narcotic burst into flame.

There was nor much time. Luke knew the situation was almost out of hand. As Ian raced toward safety, plasma licked and drained his shield. One last hot and it was broken, leaving him vulnerable, just five meters from the doorway. He thought it was over.

Just then Luke stepped forward, thumbing on the grenade-sized device in his hand, and threw it down in front of him. A transparent bubble composed of thousands of hexagonal "scales" erupted from it, forming a three-meter wide half sphere around the device. Ian dove through it at the last moment. Plasma refracted harmlessly around the shield.

Luke bent down and helped Ian up by the shoulder, throwing him into the elevator. The chieftain howled in frustration, abandoning the heavy plasma cannon and sprinting toward its game wielding its massive gravity hammer. Hailey punched the primitive "up" button as soon as the two were aboard. The blast-resistant horizontal doors slowly met. The entire interminable wait the Spartans watched the chieftain clumsily move toward them, blood no doubt filling its mind. For a moment the Spartans were in a bizarre teeter between smug thoughts of assured victory and helplessness. But their luck prevailed; before the Brute was ten meters from the elevator, the doors met and closed off view from the monster.

The Spartans all silently sighed a breath of relief as the din of the elevator shaft winches started up. Suddenly their bones rattled in their armor as a giant explosion came from the doors, which buckled inward. Their helms automatically muffled the extreme noise which was obviously the Brute attempting to smash his way through the reinforced steel. All the Spartans immediately lifted assault rifles, trained on the door, and feared the worst. To his merit, he was able to bend and mangle the barrier. But it was too little too late. By the time he broke through, the slow service elevator was two levels up, leaving him howling at the bottom of the shaft.

Now the Spartans took a breath of relied. They had a few moments to prepare themselves. Luke handed his MA5V to Ian and helped Hailey down onto a supply crate, l. he lifted her leg and inspected the wound tenderly. The spikes had dug into her right calf, and she bore them still. Blood trickled from the cracked armor, but not much.

Luke felt a rush of embarrassment and failure pass through him. It

was his fault. He had ordered Hailey to present herself as a target to the Brutes. She was their best runner. Still he could have been the one totally exposed to the oncoming fire. He couldn't imagine her pain of running on such a wound.

Hailey felt worse. Were she wounded almost anywhere else she could shrug it off. But the spikes were imbedded in her running muscles, which made her jeopardize the speed of the Spartans' escape. She was now a liability, and Spartans don't like being a liability.

Trying to break his emotional state, Luke stated the obvious. "We will leave them in for now, they're keeping you from bleeding to death. At least that will be another Purple Heart."

Hailey nodded slightly, an unseen smile on her face.

The moment was broken with a cut of lights as well as all the power to the shaft.

End
file.